

**Forum: Immigration and ESL***(Part 2 of 3)*

# How Policy Changes Affect Local Immigrant Learners

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“Teacher, what’s going to happen now?” This was a question nervously posed to me by an adult learner in my English as a Second Language (ESL) class on Wednesday, November 9, 2016, the morning after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

Civics education is an important component of what we do in adult ESL classes. Therefore, in the fall of 2016, although most of the adults in my class were not yet citizens, and, therefore, not eligible to vote, I wanted the learners to understand the upcoming election and especially the significance of red and blue states as reflected in the electoral college. While learners had strong political opinions about who they wanted to win the election, my stance was always strictly nonpartisan. Over several days, learners worked in small groups to research the number of electors in each state, and they learned that the candidate who won at least 270 electoral votes would become president of the United States even if that person did not win the popular vote. Students learned that in 2000 Al Gore lost to George W. Bush, even though Gore had won the popular vote that year. In 2016, we saw electoral college history repeated.

While Clarena Larrotta has offered a national perspective on the impact of recent immigration policies on the lives of the adults we serve

in literacy programs, my goal is to share the experience of one community.

Since 1991, I have worked in a local adult education program in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, teaching English to immigrants and refugees. Like many adult literacy practitioners, I have met people from around the world in my classes, many of whom have faced unspeakable tragedy and pain in their lives before coming to the United States. For many decades, our country, through the goodwill and generosity of our citizens, has been a refuge to those in need.

In fact, my city has a long history of welcoming those fleeing danger and persecution. There is a large community of Mennonites and Amish whose ancestors found a new home in this area seeking religious liberty centuries ago. Because welcoming the persecuted is part of our heritage, many people currently living in Lancaster share a conviction that helping those in need is a moral imperative.

In January of 2017, the BBC featured Lancaster in an online video calling my city the “**Refugee Capitol of the U.S.**” As reported by the BBC, “Since 2013, Lancaster has taken in over 1,300 refugees,” which is “20 times per capita more than the US as a whole.”

Among our more recent arrivals are families from

Syria and Somalia, two countries whose people are now banned by our government's travel restrictions. Tragically, Syrians and Somalis who have already settled in our community fear they may never again see some of their loved ones who were left behind. In addition to these travel restrictions, the current administration is also seeking to end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program, which has provided legal protection for individuals from certain places who have experienced tragedy due to extreme violence, war, or natural disaster. Many thousands of individuals from Sudan, Haiti, El Salvador, and Nicaragua under TPS, who have been living in our country for decades, may now face deportation.

I have met and taught hundreds of individuals from these countries in my ESL classes over the years. I know a woman, who at 19 – fully aware of the dangers – walked to the United States from El Salvador. There was a man from Somalia in my class whose response to the oral language assessment question “What do you like about Pennsylvania” was “There is no war here.” I know a woman who was late for a meeting with me because she had to wire \$20 to her daughter and grandchildren back home because they hadn't eaten in three days. I've encountered individuals from Haiti who lost everything, including family members, to the devastating 2010 earthquake.

I've met many refugees and immigrants who have been traumatized by violence, poverty, and natural disasters, and yet the enormous stamina and resilience most of them demonstrate is a testament to human potential and strength. I know foreign-trained physicians from Haiti, Cuba and Iraq who are now providing much needed health care here in the U.S. A brilliant former student from Iran received an award for the highest score on the GED and is now attending college pursuing a career in health care. There are many refugees, for

example from Nepal and Myanmar, who volunteer their time in our public schools because they want to give back. There are untold numbers of hard-working immigrants who have started their own successful businesses.

In our community, we've heard of raids in workplaces, and immigrants being deported. We worry that raids might even happen in our classrooms. Learners who had TPS status for many years are concerned about their families being turned upside down if they are forced to leave. How do families who have children who were born here and are U.S. citizens handle such chaotic disruption? What of the rights of natural born citizens? Also heartbreaking are stories we hear from those who dreamed they would one day have the opportunity to be reunited with family members by sponsoring them to come to the U.S. Those dreams have been shattered.

Unfortunately, those making immigration policy are blind to the many powerful ways immigrants contribute to our communities. These new immigration policies, in addition to the overwhelming stress experienced by those with uncertain status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the horrific treatment of families seeking asylum at the border where children, including even infants, have been separated from their parents, are transforming the United States from a country that has long reflected the words etched on our beloved Statue of Liberty to one that cowers in fear and lashes out cruelly to those who are different.

With the critical distinctions that Native Americans were here long before any Europeans arrived and many Africans were brought here in chains to be enslaved, the United States is a nation of immigrants. A majority of us can harken back to ancestors who came here seeking

safety, freedom and a better life. While each new group of immigrants has often faced persecution, diversity has made our country strong and, dare I say, “exceptional.”

I’m proud to report that, in Lancaster, leaders from government, business and civil society have recognized that immigrants enrich our community and are necessary to keep us economically strong. In 2017, Lancaster was one of 25 cities to receive technical assistance from the New American Economy and Welcoming America. This award included a research study to explore the impact immigrants and refugees have had on our community. Through the **Gateways for Growth** study, we learned that these new residents “contribute over **\$1.3 billion** to our annual GDP, this translates to **\$155 million** in state, local, and federal taxes paid, bringing **\$440 million in yearly spending power** to our community.” Immigrants are also “more likely to be self-employed and are responsible for creating or retaining over 1,000 manufacturing jobs” in our community.

As noted by **John Feinblatt, President of the New American Economy**, “While Congress debates the value of immigration, in city after city, the evidence is already in—immigrants revive neighborhoods and drive economic growth.” Local leaders in Lancaster, including the president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce, have echoed this sentiment with conviction and enthusiasm during public gatherings and in **newspaper op eds**.

Due to the understanding and vision of local leaders that immigrants are needed to keep our economy strong as well as the compassion of much of the faith community and others in our area, I believe that we will weather this current hateful storm. As noted in the **Gateways for Growth** report “immigrants and refugees are part of our

community’s DNA.”

It is abundantly clear that this new political landscape has created challenges for adult educators and the learners we serve. While we need to be respectful of diverse points of view, many of us are understandably deeply concerned. Thankfully, several years ago, our community formed a coalition of local organizations to support immigrant and refugee integration. This coalition, which meets regularly, represents refugee resettlement agencies, providers of health care, adult and K-12 education, housing, and employment services as well as representatives from the various immigrant groups and the faith community. There is even a volunteer group that restores computers to donate to immigrants and refugees in need. Through our coalition, we are seeking to educate both those at risk from the new immigration policies and those of us who work with immigrants and refugees. Workshops on the legal rights of immigrants living in the U.S. have been offered to immigrants and the general public. We are learning how to legally protect the most vulnerable.

On November 9, 2016, like most of our country and the world, the learners in my ESL class were shocked when Hillary Clinton lost the electoral college. Despite my deep sense of foreboding about the future, I realized how important it was for me to convey to the class the principle of the peaceful transition of power, which is perhaps the single most essential key to maintaining a stable democracy. That day in class, we listened to excerpts of President Obama’s speech as well as Hillary Clinton’s concession speech. In their words, both Obama and Clinton highlighted this quintessential aspect of our democratic system.

I told the students that it was not possible to predict exactly what the future would bring

with this new president. However, almost immediately we began to see the hateful rhetoric toward immigrants and refugees turned into policy. In response, there has been an enormous groundswell of activism across the nation, as well as in our community, among those who are standing up for what is right and good.

On November 8, 2016, our country changed in dramatic ways; however, given the vision and compassion of the American people as well as

the ingenuity, strength, and resilience of the immigrants and refugees who have been woven into our communities, I have to remain hopeful that goodness will prevail. I have said many times that each day seems to bring a new heartache, but despair is not the answer. The antidote to despair is to work with others to actively advocate for what is right. Thankfully, over the last two years, we have seen that joining together with those who share our values has become commonplace across the country. We must be steadfast in these efforts.

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